



UNITED STATES OFFICE OF PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT
Washington, DC 20415

The Director

MEMORANDUM

TO: Heads and Acting Heads of Departments and Agencies
FROM: Charles Ezell, Acting Director, U.S. Office of Personnel Management
DATE: April 3, 2025
RE: New Senior Professional Performance Appraisal System and Plan

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (“OPM”) is providing a new Senior Professional Performance Appraisal System, and accompanying Senior Professional Performance Plan that all agencies must adopt beginning with the Fiscal Year 2026 performance cycle.

This Appraisal System, and Plan shall be used by all Senior-Level (SL) and Scientific or Professional (ST) employees (Senior Professionals) covered under 5 U.S.C. 5108(a) and 5 U.S.C. 3104(a) beginning in October 2025 (the first quarter of FY 2026).¹ All agencies with SL and ST employees must adopt the new system and program, plan, and fiscal year rating cycle with an implementation date of October 1, 2025. All Senior Professionals shall be appraised using this system no later than September 30, 2026.

Like the new governmentwide SES Performance Appraisal System, the Senior Professional Appraisal System (see Attachment 1) and Performance Plan (see Attachment 2) will deliver enhanced accountability and ensure that Senior Professionals are responsive to the needs, policies, and goals of the agency, and that their performance is of the highest quality.

Finally, language in agencies’ current Senior Professional Performance Plans should be immediately revised to comply with the January 20, 2025, Presidential Memorandum entitled [*Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferencing*](#) (“*Ending Government DEP*”). To annotate the modification, agencies should utilize Part 14 of the performance plan if using the Basic SL/ST System, or an appropriate notation block of the performance plan if using its own SL/ST System. Agencies must communicate changes to each Senior Professional no later than April 11, 2025.

¹ Agencies not subject to the SES, but who utilize the SES Basic System, are reminded of the recent issued SES Basic system and encouraged to adopt the new system as they will no longer be able to use the current SES Basic system after September 30, 2025.

I. Background

Known as “Senior Professionals,” SL/ST employees are among the highest-ranking employees at their agencies. Agency leaders rely upon Senior Professionals for subject matter expertise and strategic advice. While Senior Professionals do not meet the functional criteria of the SES, they exceed the responsibilities of the highest grade level of the General Schedule. SL employees provide subject matter expertise to support agency leaders in driving successful organizational programs that are responsive to the needs, policies, and goals of the Nation. ST employees carry out research and development functions that require specially qualified personnel.

Senior Professional performance management is governed by [5 CFR part 430, subparts A and B](#). Similar to the SES, Senior Professional performance management requires monitoring, rating, and rewarding both individual and organizational performance.

On January 20, 2025, President Trump issued [Restoring Accountability for Career Senior Executives](#) to reinvigorate the SES performance appraisal system and “ensure[] that SES officials are properly accountable to the President and the American people.” This presidential memorandum was part of President Trump’s broader effort restore and maintain “professionalism and accountability within the civil service.” See, e.g., Executive Order 14171, [Restoring Accountability to Policy-Influencing Positions Within the Federal Workforce](#) (Jan. 20, 2025).

Senior Professionals directly support SES members and other agency leaders, and agency leadership crucially relies upon Senior Professionals for subject matter expertise and strategic advice in carrying out their most important functions. Senior Professionals should be held to similarly high-performance standards as the SES and should equally be subject to appropriate accountability measures.

Similar to the SES, over-inflation of performance ratings exists for Senior Professionals. For the fiscal year 2023 performance cycle, an average of 90% of Senior Professionals (SL - 92% and ST - 89%) received an “Outstanding” or “Exceeds Fully Successful” performance rating. Less than a half of a percent of Senior Professionals were rated below “Fully Successful.” Such a performance rating system fails to make meaningful distinctions in Senior Professional performance and frustrates accurate and effective performance management, which relies crucially on making meaningful distinctions between excellent and mediocre and poor performance.

II. Improvements to the Senior Professional Performance Appraisal System

Consistent with the President’s direction, the new Senior Professional Performance System and Program, and Plan will reinvigorate the Senior Professional Performance Appraisal System to ensure that it differentiates excellent from mediocre or poor performance; provides a meaningful basis to determine whether Senior Professionals should be retained; and ties Senior Professional bonuses directly to performance. Under this new system and program, the prohibition on the use of a forced distribution of ratings is removed. OPM will initiate the rulemaking process to revise 5 CFR § 430.208(c).

Establishing governmentwide limits on rating levels will promote a high-performance culture. For agencies with four or more Senior Professionals, no more than 30% of total ratings

shall be Levels 4 and 5, unless the President waives the provision by certifying that the performance of the agency's Senior Professionals was outstanding during the relevant time period. Only truly exceptional performers will receive the highest ratings, and poor performers will receive ratings commensurate with their performance.

The new critical elements and performance requirements evaluate whether the Senior Professional faithfully supported the administration of the law and the President's policies and upheld the principles of the Founding, including equality under law and democratic self-government; whether the Senior Professional supported and contributed to demonstrable improvements in government efficiency; whether the Senior Professional demonstrated merit and competence in relevant job duties; whether the Senior Professional served as a trusted partner, leader and mentor to agency leadership; and whether the Senior Professional drove organizational success and met or exceeded specific performance objectives from the President's Management Agenda, Agency Strategic Plan, Congressional Budget Justification/Annual Performance Plan, and other organizational planning documents tailored to the Senior Professional's role at the agency.

Below is an overview of significant updates to the Basic SL/ST Performance Appraisal System:

1. **Updated Critical Elements and Performance Requirements:** OPM has updated the SL/ST Critical Elements and Performance Requirements to mirror the recently issued SES Critical Elements and Performance Requirements. The revamped critical elements will evaluate Senior Professionals on whether they faithfully supported the administration of the law and advanced the President's policy priorities; promoted government efficiency; demonstrated merit and competence; held others accountable and treated them fairly; and achieved organizational goals.
2. **Monitoring Performance:** At least quarterly, supervisors and Senior Professionals must meet to discuss, and document, progress toward meeting the critical elements in the Senior Professional's performance plan.
3. **Distribution of Ratings:** For agencies with four or more Senior Professionals, no more than 30% of total ratings shall be Levels 4 and 5, unless the President waives the provision by certifying that the performance of the agency's Senior Professionals was outstanding during the relevant time period. OPM will revise and finalize the necessary rulemaking before issuing final guidance for implementation. Until that rulemaking is completed, agencies should treat the 30% cap on Levels 4 and 5 as general guidance for ensuring "performance evaluation results that make meaningful distinctions based on relative performance," 5 C.F.R. § 430.405(b)(1)(iii), and not a hard-and-fast rule or requirement.
4. **Pay Adjustments and Performance Awards:** Only Senior Professionals rated Level 4 or Level 5 should receive a performance award or performance-based pay adjustment exceeding 5% of their rate of basic pay. A Senior Professional rated Level 3 should not receive a performance award that exceeds 5% of their rate of basic pay.

No later than October 31, 2025, all agencies must provide confirmation to OPM of their transition to the Senior Professional Performance Appraisal System and Performance Plan. For agencies not currently on a fiscal-year SL/ST performance cycle, appropriate actions must be taken, in compliance with 5 CFR part 430, subparts A and B, to extend the current cycle and close out on September 30, 2025. Please send confirmation of transition to the new system and program to performance-management@opm.gov.

cc: Chief Human Capital Officers (CHCOs), Deputy CHCOs, Human Resources Directors, and Chiefs of Staff

Attachment 1: FY 2026 Governmentwide SL/ST Performance Appraisal System and Program

Attachment 2: FY 2026 Governmentwide SL/ST Performance Plan

Attachment 3: Updated Language to SL/ST Basic Performance Plan